

Task forces begin mill-saving effort

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Rick Bass,
Yaak Valley Forest Council

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Task forces to work on timber supply, a community asbestos health fund and plan a summit with elected officials were organized Friday following a second teleconference between community leaders and Stimson Lumber Co. CEO Andrew Miller.

Miller talked with business and political leaders Monday about Stimson's mounting liability problems due to workers' compensation cases filed as a result of asbestos-related health claims. In addition, Stimson needs assurance that at least 90 million board feet of

timber will be harvested in the foreseeable future.

The Libby mill's 10-year timber supply contract with Plum Creek ends in 18 months. Presently, 60 to 70 mmbf are being cut on the Kootenai National Forest.

Keith Olson, executive director of the Montana Logging Association, Daryl Pfeifer of Stimson, Jeff Gruber, Terry Andreessen and Robyn King or Rick Bass of the Yaak Valley Forest Council agreed to work with Bob Castaneda, supervisor for the Kootenai National Forest on establishing how much timber can be made available

under existing environmental restrictions and what types of timber might be involved.

A second group - Pat Naughton, director of the Lincoln County Economic Development Council, Lincoln County Commissioner Rita Window, Bruce Vincent and Castaneda will be planning a summit with Montana and federal election officials during the upcoming summer recess.

The third task force - Rep. Eileen Carney, Tom Wood, Gary Spencer and John Johanson will be looking at how

See **Task forces** on Page 7

Task force

Continued from Page 1
much money is needed for a community health fund for asbestos victims.

In the past, the community members have said a trust of about \$500 million would be needed to provide adequate health care for Libby asbestos victims. There are more than 700 community members diagnosed with asbestos related diseases

with more expected in the near future.

"We have to get all this stuff hashed out before the bottle pushers get here," said Vincent, who is coordinating the effort.

Since his first phone call, Miller explained he visited in Washington, D.C., with administration officials and the Montana congressional delegation to propose a community health trust

funded by timber receipts.

Over and over in the nation's capital he heard that the request should be a plan agreed to and made by the community, Miller said.

Miller said he has already heard concerns about tying logging to the health fund and resulting in pressure to cut more than the forest can sustain.

"That won't happen," he said.

"It couldn't today."

Miller said the mill will have to find a way to increase its profitability to cover mounting liabilities while remaining competitive.

"Other than scratching out another nickel out of the plant, I don't think there's anything to be done," Miller said of the liability problems.

Stimson has seen its workers'

compensation insurance increase significantly in the past year and they anticipate another raise in the coming year. Miller said it was an unknown liability that might be relieved if there is a health trust established.

Plywood plant manager Fred Sturgess said Stimson has been aggressive about upgrading equipment since they purchased the mill in 1993.

"We have a lot of flexibility and capable people that make it work," he said. "That little mill pays it bills."

Bass noted that the Yaak Valley Forest Council is committed to keeping the Libby mill open.

"I think we all cling to the myth of J. Neils and want to get back there," he said. "This may be a chance to do that."